

When Does a Message Source's Race Impact How That Message Is Received – Racial and Social Justice Knowledge, Prejudice, and the Belief in Racism as a Zero-Sum Game

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Introduction

Race and social justice is a salient issue in the United States, as demonstrated by media coverage of the killing of Trayvon Martin, the killing of Eric Garner, and other cases. Consequently, the “Black Lives Matter” movement (BLM) has risen, first on social media and later evolving into an umbrella organization for social activism.

BLM has been met with controversy, with some claiming that anti-black racism is overblown and that the movement is illegitimate, especially in comparison to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Given that BLM is primarily led by Black activists, questions arise like whether the arguments advanced by BLM would be better received if they were advanced by White people.

White people tend to pay closer attention to information that is believed to be coming from a Black source. This tendency is magnified in White people with low prejudice; this has been called the “watchdog effect” because Whites are guarding against prejudiced responses (Petty, Fleming, & White, 1999). The current political climate and media landscape is well-suited to interrogate issues like these.

Aim

This research asks:

1. How does the race of an author affect how that author's message is received when that message reflects modern issues surrounding race, social justice, and political activism?
2. To what degree does having various preexisting factors such as knowledge of racial and social justice issues, prejudice, and the perception of racism as a zero-sum game (a phenomenon first illuminated by Norton and Sommers, 2011) impact how a reader receives that same message?

Method

- 203 participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk.
- These participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions and read an article that compared BLM positively with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The two conditions differed as to whether the author was a black woman or a white woman.
- After reading the article, participants rated it, the author, and BLM using semantic differential scales; completed a thought listing about the article; filled out a modified Modern Racism Scale (MRS); assigned numeric values to how much anti-White and anti-Black prejudice they believe existed in each decade from the 1950s to present day; completed a mood scale; and answered a quiz to gauge their knowledge of recent events such as the killing of Trayvon Martin and the death of Sandra Bland.
- After all data were collected, correlations and regression analyses were performed.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Provoked Violence — Just Like Black Lives Matter



The two conditions to which participants were assigned.

'Martin Luther King, Jr. Provoked Violence – Just Like Black Lives Matter'

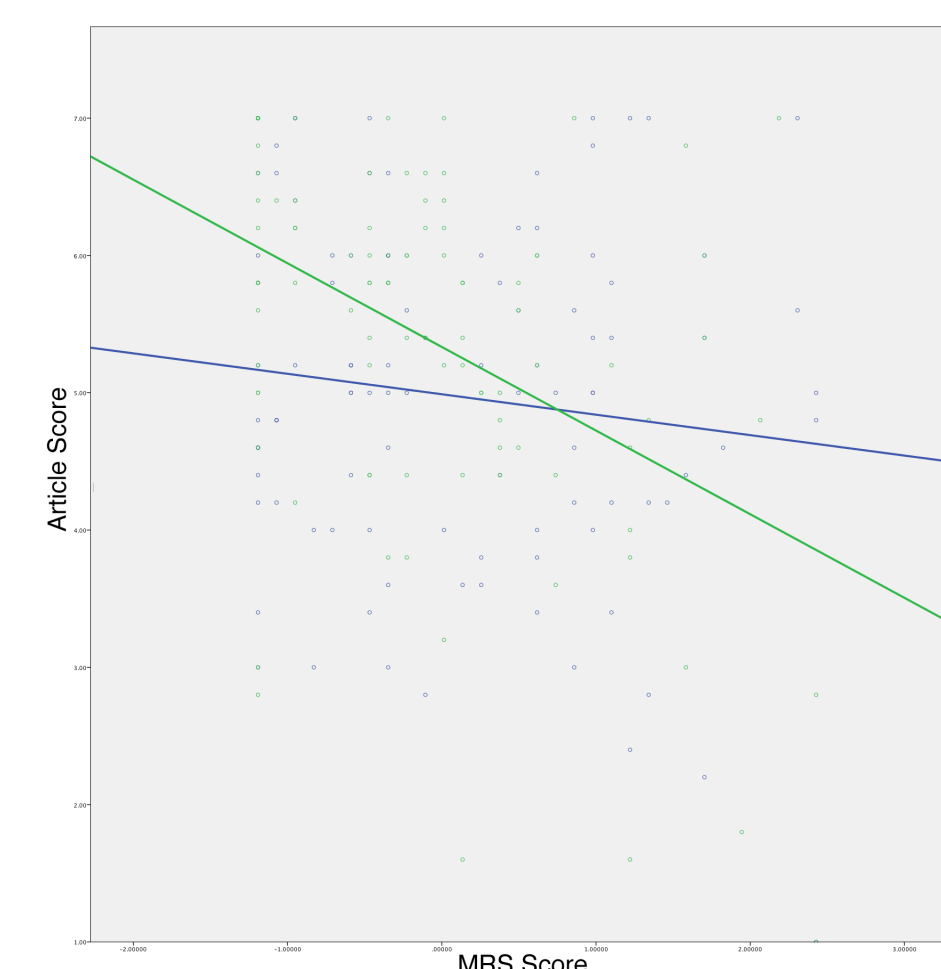


Figure 1

Green = Black Author Condition

Blue = White Author Condition

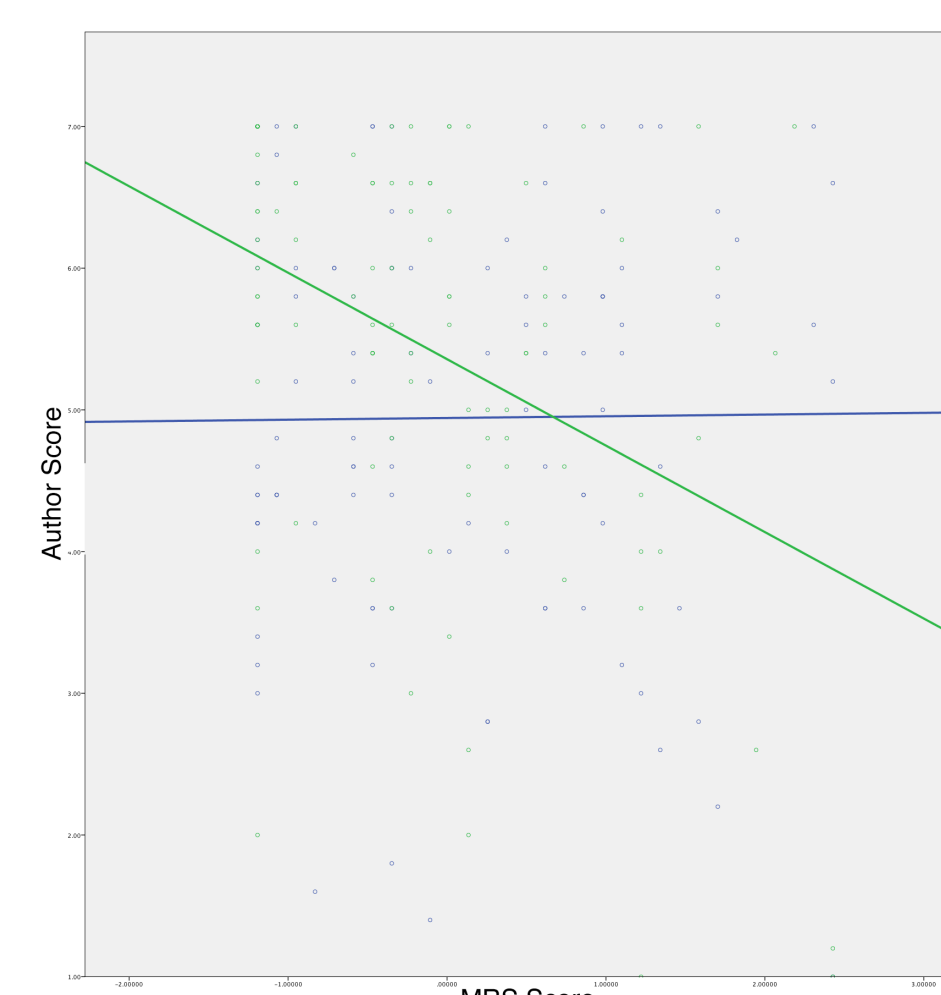


Figure 2

Green = Black Author Condition

Blue = White Author Condition

Results

Attention was paid to the differences between how subjects rated the article, its author, and BLM depending on whether their author was a white woman or a black woman, and depending on the subjects' personal attributes, such as prejudice and their belief in racism as a zero-sum game. The semantic differential scales subjects used to rate the article, its author, and BLM all showed significant inter-question correlations (> 0.765).

- Participants' MRS scores moderated the relationship between the author's race and ratings of the article; **Beta = -0.54, $t = -2.66$, $p < .01$** . As seen in Figure 1, participants low in prejudice rated the article higher when the author was black than when the author was white; participants high in prejudice rated the article higher when the author was white than when the author was black.
- MRS scores also moderated the relationship between the author's race and how participants rated her; **Beta = -0.66, $t = -3.16$, $p < .01$** . Figure 2 shows that low prejudice participants rated the black author higher than the white author; high prejudice participants rated the white author higher than the black author. Furthermore, participants across all prejudice levels rated the white author about the same.
- Figure 3 shows a break from this pattern in that there was only a main effect of MRS scores on how participants rated BLM; **Beta = -0.51, $t = -3.16$, $p < .01$** .
- I also replicated Norton and Sommers' finding in that our participants see racism as a zero-sum game, as seen in Figure 4.

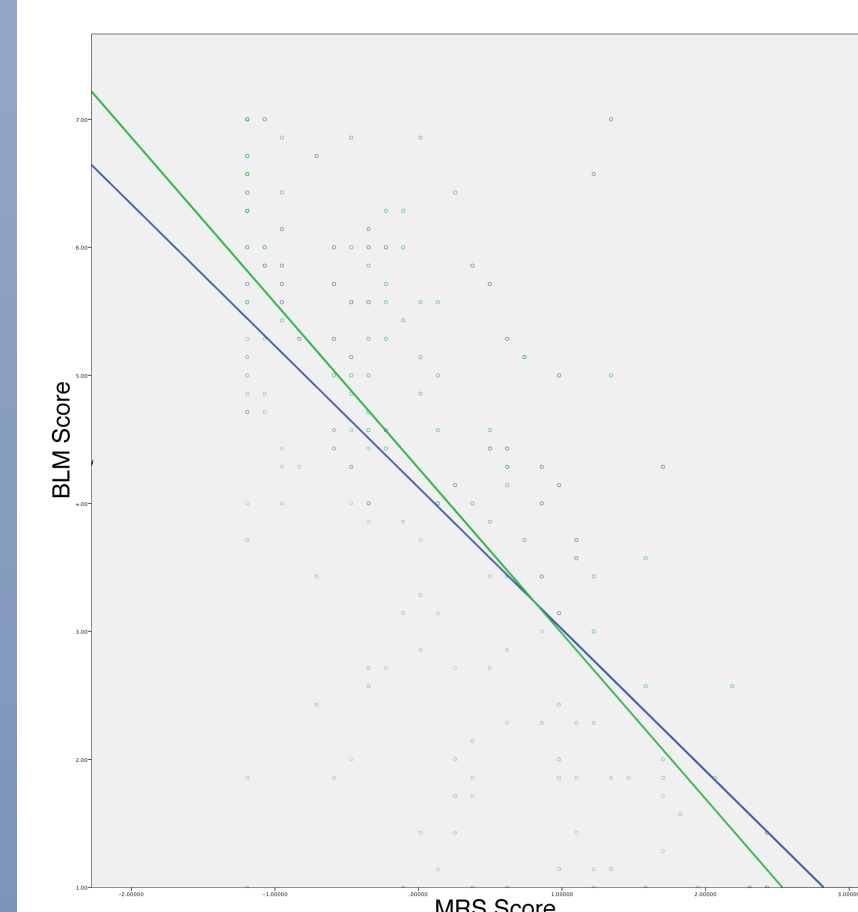


Figure 3

Green = Black Author Condition

Blue = White Author Condition

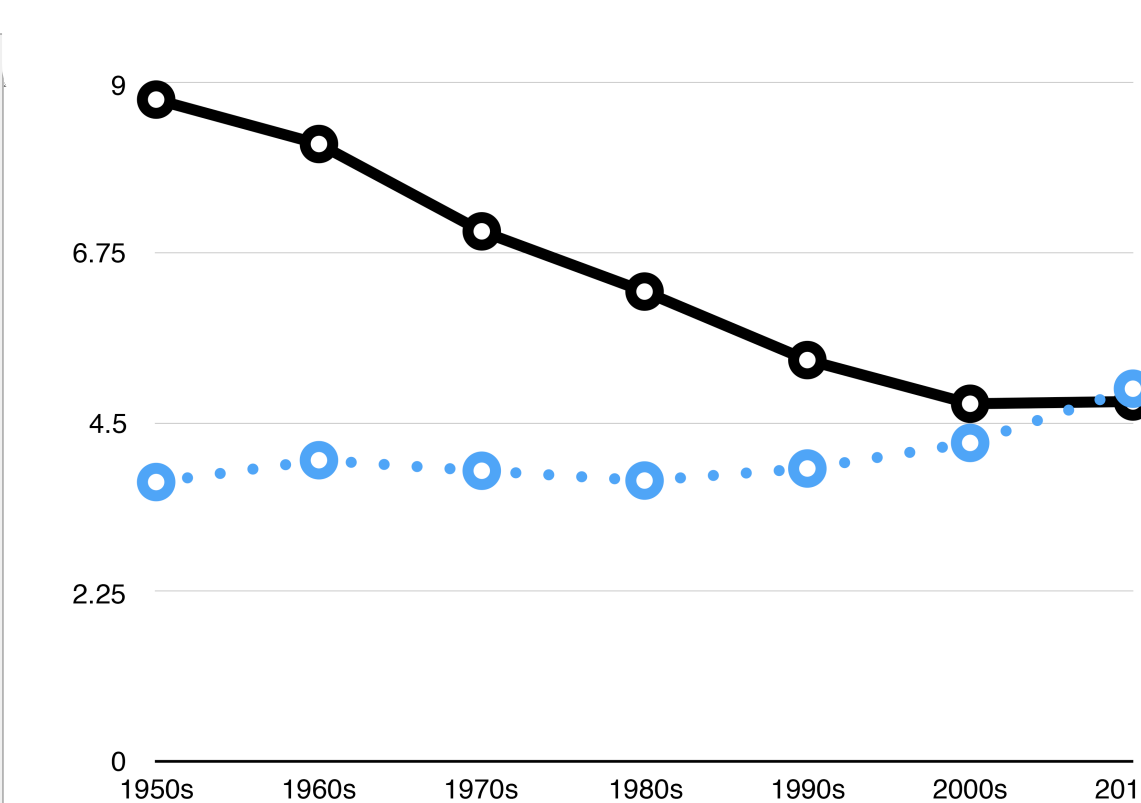


Figure 4

Solid Line= Anti-Black Prejudice

Dotted = Anti-White Prejudice

Discussion

Here, subjects who were low in prejudice rated the black author and her article better than the white author and her article. In concert, this suggests that the race of a message's source still has an impact on audiences, but that impact can be moderated by the audience's prejudice. Paradoxically, people with low prejudice may be setting lower expectations for black information sources rather than treating them equally. Conversely and intuitively, people with high prejudice treat black information sources worse than they would treat a white information source. Prejudice has a serious impact on how people receive information, with stronger effects arising when a person has extremely low prejudice or extremely high prejudice.

Conclusions

The idea of a post-racial society is sometimes floated in everyday discourse, particularly after the election of President Barack Obama. However, this idea is far from true, especially in light of how discourse has shifted towards calling African American activism such as Black Lives Matter “divisive” and even “racist.” While leaders of these movements have their own prerogative, this study suggests that race and prejudice are still impactful and that the faces of social movements may need careful vetting in order to achieve the most success.

References

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